Passing Time

The kitchen has a small table.
Formica wood grain
metal legs splayed out at each corner —
where a transistor radio sits.
This ancient platform holds ritual
items of daily living stained and folded,
napkins newspapers and grocery lists
piled inconspicuously as history.

Mornings we gather
elbows planted
like tent poles beneath our chins,
all day rotating shifts
as dreamers and window sill watchers,
cought up in life’s small dramas.
Outside fox squirrels and jays
battle each day in the pitifully scarred limbs
of one old soldier amputee box elder.

We are kitchen sentries on duty
and call out when company comes.
Biindigen.
Visitors keep coming in
the screen door revolving
like seasons of the moon.
Ode’mini-giizis
strawberry moon,
waatbagaa-giizis
leaves changing color moon.
Voices speak into half empty cups.
Biindigen. “Come on in.”

Company chair sits waiting
beneath the teapot clock,
hand-painted wooden stepping stool
below the garden window,
doorway space
for standing or leaning.
It’s crowded sometimes, but good for talking,
just right to gather within reach
of gingersnaps and stovetop coffee,
a place where fresh air blows in
through all the windows and the open door.

It’s a cribbage kitchen.
Worn cards always ready
shuffled like players’ faces
like cribbage boards through the years.
1972, carved deer antler.
1984, three-handed ace.
And the small spiral notebook
meticulously lists 28 hands,
double skunks, wins and losses.
Games waver and cross
the ghost space of memory,
cross like voices calling
and cards falling.
Fifteen two, fifteen four
and there ain’t no more.
See one, play one.
1998, this low vision innovation:
huge twenty-four inch board
white rings circling

each thumb-sized peg hole.
That’s a go.

II

My uncle Bill came visiting.
Sitting there by the fridge
three weeks ago in November.
Mother hunched on the company chair,
Muff by the toaster, Daddy in the middle,
and me perched on the stool.
Muff brought me a war club.
We passed it by the diamond willow handle
admiring it and making jokes.

Then Bill was talking rising.
Naming his poling partner,
the lakes and rivers they paddled,
telling how long they stayed out,
how many pounds they harvested,
where they slept each night.
All those details
the husk around a kernel.
Do you ever just ache
for something
a sliver of beauty
so tightly encased?
Dance dance the rice.

They had to come home early
he said
their car so small
no room for another day
another canoe bottom full
they had to come home
while still he longed to go out.
*Bend and pound the rice.*

Eighty-three this year,
he won’t sell the rice.
Next season
he might not be able to go.
And him with so many
to support.
All us rice relatives.
Could he list us
like dependents
on his income tax?
Never once made enough
he laughs
to pay taxes.
*Manoominike-giizis,* ricing moon.

He ended the rice talk then
telling about a certain place
pretty place down by Mille Lacs.
It got dark early that day.
They had to turn back at the narrows
never got to rice the beds
beds they knew were just there
through the narrows
just there on the next lake.
“If I feel like I do now,” he said,
“I’ll go again.”
*Winnow with your every breath.*

My Auntie came that day.
I gave her the stool

passed her the war club.
We were talking about birds now
about the two great horned owls
I kept stumbling upon last spring.
I was sneaking up on one
with my camera
and baby behind me
him imitating everything I did
when we got within ten feet
he took off running toward it
yelling
“Quack! quack! quack.”
For him every bird was still a duck.

We all had bird stories to tell
that morning
in the time of the freezing moon
while my hair was drying
and I was drinking coffee
and my little dying mother
sat smiling
beneath the teapot clock.
*Gishkadino-giizis.*